

President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Issues

Following is a transcript of President Reagan's news conference last night in Washington, as recorded by The New York Times.

OPENING STATEMENT

I have a few remarks here before taking your questions. With the holiday season upon us, I'm delighted to see Americans giving each other the best Christmas present possible—a strong economy that will insure more jobs and opportunities in the months ahead. Confidence is in the air and with good reason. Today's encouraging news on the strength of housing starts and personal income, recent reports on prices, retail sales, employment and factory use all confirm a well-earned 1983 has been a banner year for the American economy, with the United States economy enjoying a strong recovery and its lowest rate of inflation since the 1960's. Wholesale prices last month actually fell. Consumers are flocking into stores during the holiday season; our factories are operating at nearly 80 percent of capacity, up more than 10 percentage points from a year ago.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Troops in Lebanon

Q. Mr. President, last week you said that if there's a complete collapse, you'll pull the troops out of Lebanon. Did you mean that if General Fahs fails to put together a broad, viable Government that you'd pull out? Or can you clarify? And I'd like to follow up.

A. Yes, I can clarify. Here, actually, I was asking a hypothetical question about whether there were other circumstances other than achieving our goal by which the Marines might leave, the withdrawal of national force, and I tried—I guess I tried to give a hypothetical answer to that, and maybe a bad choice of words.

I simply meant that the only thing I—and I don't foresee this—but the only thing I could think of that might achieve our goal would be if perhaps that Government and the forces that he's dealing with in Beirut were to broaden the Government, if there should be a complete change of course to the place that we were no longer asked to be there, that they were going in a different direction than the one that brought us in in the first place and that they had a purpose that would be a reason for bringing them out.

But I wasn't trying to send anyone a message or anything. I was just trying to say, well, you can't say there isn't any other way by which they wouldn't come out.

Q. Mr. President, do you think that you've put the U.S. as the peacekeeper role, in jeopardy by making a military presence at this time?

A. Well, I didn't make any point of anything that was different than what has been our relationship. I think there was a real question in this talking to Prime Minister Shamir. We emphasized to him that we were going to go forward with our relations with the moderate Arab states as part of our hope for being a catalyst—or trying to be—in bringing all together and ending the war.

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Unemployment is still too high, but there are more people working in this country today than ever before, and every month we're creating over 30,000 new jobs.

In the last few weeks I've been involved in a number of meetings about next year's budget. And it's clear that here in Washington all of us, both in the Congress and the executive branch, still have our work cut out for us.

If the Congress will help me to restrain Government spending, we can justify the people's confidence and keep America moving forward. We can make 1984 a year of strong and steady progress for America, continuing economic growth, unemployment coming down and inflation staying under control.

And now before we begin the questions, I'd like to wish the members of the White House press corps a very happy holiday season.

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President Reagan answering a question at his news conference last night.

A. Yes, yes. And he had his own words also about it. And I'm in complete agreement with those, too, Chris?

Q. Mr. President, the House subcommittee investigating the bombing in Beirut has found a quote, "Very serious errors in judgment were made both by officers on the ground and by the Pentagon."

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A. Well, Chris, there are two reports. There's a very voluminous report and a shorter one that has been brought in by the military team that's been investigating this, as well as the regional group. Both of those have just arrived at the Defense Department, and Secretary Weinberger is having a complete study made of them and then will submit a report to me on his findings, probably within the next several days.

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they will remember that they're Lebanese, and they want to be Lebanese for the Lebanese people, they will come in at his request and join the Government. And he's trying to broaden the base of the Government to give them representation, and end that kind of fighting there.

Q. Mr. President, a question and follow-up, sir, seems evident from the polls that the American people do not support the U.S. Marine presence in Lebanon right now. Respectfully, sir, whether the policy is right or wrong, do you believe the public will put up with continuing American deaths there?

A. Well, I can understand public opinion, because they're hearing great attacks from a number of sources on our presence there—some of them, I think, politically motivated. But I have to say that about the mission, the purpose of being there—and let me just take a moment if I can on this.

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we've trimmed them up at the upper level.

Today, any family with an income at a level of 130 percent of poverty—the poverty level or lower—is eligible for these Government programs. And indeed we are taking care of more people than we've ever taken care of before.

And there has been nothing in our programs, or anything else, that can be taken as prejudice against any sector of our society. Indeed, with regard to the civil rights movement and racial prejudice in this country, I'm old enough to have been on the right side of that long before the term civil rights was ever used.

And, with regard to women, I think the record shows—the laws we've changed, the regulations we've changed all the time, the number of appointments—there's no prejudice there.

But I do know that a perception has been created—and—right today, with these employment figures that I gave—with the drop in unemployment, blacks and women are getting a higher proportion of those new jobs than is anyone else.

Q. Blacks are still unemployed. And discrimination plays a part in it. And you seem to be against those methods that have been put into place for eradicating discrimination.

A. No, not at all. And secondly, in the telephone conversation that one of the causes was the seniority system. And I asked you what you would do about it, and you said we'd have to speed up the process, but you didn't explain that process. I wish you would explain to me that process.

A. What process is this? Q. That's what I'm asking you. A. Well, I mean what I just said, I lost something there.

Q. O.K. I asked you—I said to you you were against the seniority system, and you said, well, that's because of the seniority system you wouldn't. And I asked you what you would do about that, because blacks would still be the last hired and the first fired. You said we'd have to speed up the process. I asked you what you did mean by the process, and I didn't get an answer. I wish you would explain that.

A. Well, I think that you've given an example there that is a very difficult one, because of fairness to all people. I think that's a very difficult one in which seniority and service is the basis for employment, and you also picked at a level of government in which the Federal Government has no business interfering, there isn't anything that we could do unless there's an outright violation of some individual's civil rights.

But I just think that there can be common sense programs. I'm not missing where you won't have to wait until someone has accumulated a great many years of seniority before he comes eligible. The broader-based government in Lebanon acceptable to more of the people—those that are presently hostile to the government—and the foreign forces back to their own borders.

Q. Mr. President, do you think that you've put the U.S. as the peacekeeper role, in jeopardy by making a military presence at this time?

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A. Well, I take my friend Bill more seriously. I read that column, too, and I'll have to have a talk with him shortly.

Marines' Security

Q. The subcommittee report that was mentioned earlier tonight also concluded that continued deployment of the marines will almost certainly lead to further casualties. I know you don't want to discuss what the security arrangements were for the attack but what about now? Are you confident that as of tonight the marines in Beirut are as protected as they can be given where they are?

A. I won't be able to answer that again until I, too, see the reports—particularly a report that is coming in that is very voluminous and must go into great detail—it's about that thick and it has been made by military experts. So I just can't comment until I know.

Q. If I could just ask you, sir, then, are you saying that you aren't sure at this point whether tonight the marines are as adequately protected as they can be?

A. I think they are to the extent that those on the field and the officers that are involved there are doing everything they can to insure that—and I just have to assume that and I think that I'm justified assuming it.

Prisoner in Syria

Q. Mr. President, within days of your inauguration in 1981, you vowed that Americans would not be held hostage again. And the Syrians are holding Airmen Lieut. Robert Goodman and say they won't release him until the Marines leave Lebanon. Do you consider Lieutenant Goodman a hostage? And what efforts are under way to secure his release?

A. Well, we have believed for a long time that the settlement there must be—in this whole area must be political. I should've said this earlier in my answer about that, because blacks would still be the last hired and the first fired. You said we'd have to speed up the process. I asked you what you did mean by the process, and I didn't get an answer. I wish you would explain that.

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